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Some Episodes from my Life

At the moment when major newspapers, like the New York Times, bring articles telling about the co-operation of the Swiss government with Nazi Germany by accepting gold taken from the Jews and investing it in Swiss banks and not permitting persecuted Jews to enter Switzerland, I remembered my own sad experience. This was in September 1938, when I was forced to travel from Italy via Switzerland and France to England. It happened as follows:

There were two incidents in 1935 that made it clear to me that, as a Jew, it was high time for me to leave Germany. I worked at a Jewish private bank, Baer & Auerbach, in Munich. Nazi thugs threw rocks into the street level window panes of the bank which caused the owners to close the bank forever. Then, one day, I met a cousin for lunch at a restaurant not far from the Braune Haus, Karlstrasse, the seat of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei. During lunch, we overheard a heated discussion between one of the party members in uniform and a waitress. "No Jews are permitted in this place" he screamed, "get them out!" The waitress came over to our table and asked us to leave. We paid and left, pretty much shaken up. It was raining hard outside. I went next door into a hallway and cried. A gentleman followed me and said: "Bitte nehmen Sie das nicht zu schwer, Fraeulein. Nicht jeder ist derselben Meinung." ("Please, Miss, don't take this too hard. Not everybody shares this opinion.")

I knew that my parents who lived in Frankfurt a.M. would not permit me to leave Germany. So, I packed my suitcases with my belonging, sent these to Frankfurt, packed my knapsack and hitch-hiked from Munich via Lake Constance and Switzerland to Milan, Italy.

Barely three years later, after two jobs as governess in Milan - jobs, that were not always very pleasant - and a position as foreign secretary in an antique bookstore in Naples and studies of Italian literature, Italian history and history of art at the Universita per gli Stranieri in Perugia, the conditions in Italy became very critical for Jews. At that time, Hitler, who had lined up with Mussolini,was to visit Naples. The owner of the bookstore Detken & Rocholl where I worked in Naples, Berhard Johannowsky, a staunch Sudeten German and Nazi sympathizer, wanted to give a set of lithographic views of Naples personally to Hitler. He asked me to make a folder and decorate it with the design of the Italian flag and the swastica intertwined. Since I did not want to forfeit my job (I was being paid " behind the counter" illegally, as I was a foreigner) I did this, although reluctantly. Hardly had I come home to my boarding house in a rather seedy section near the center of Naples when I heard a knock at the door. Two gentlemen were at the door. They showed me their badges identifying themselves as police officers. They told

me that they had to take me into custody and asked me to pack a few belongings. Of course, I was totally shaken up. After all, what crime was I guilty of? Then it dawned on me that Hitler's visit could be the cause. The officers confirmed this. They called it "protective custody". They took me in their horse-drawn buggy to my destination, yet, because they seem to have felt sorry for me, they invited me on the way for a cup of espresso. We finally arrived at the State Prison of Poggio-Reale where I joined female prisoners who were guilty of the worst crimes. A nun finger-printed me, photographed me and showed me to my cell. There I found an Italian student whose Communist ideas had made her a criminal under Mussolini's regime. Also a very nice young woman, a Frau Wolf from Cologne, whose husband was in the export fruit business. She was able to buy her freedom for a sum of money.

I spent eleven agonizing days at Poggio-Reale together with about twelve German Jewish women and a small group of German prostitutes. We all were worried that they would send us back to Germany. This happened to their husbands and sons who were never heard from again.

After a few days in prison, a nun came to fetch me for an interrogation. This took place in a spare room which was divided by an iron grill. Behind the grill were two police officers. One of them, the one who interrogated me, was the officer who had picked me up at my boarding house. He asked me all sorts of questions: "Why are you in Italy?". "With whom do you associate?" etc. I had nothing to hide and answered all his questions most faithfully. After a while, the second officer left the room. With that, my interrogator whispered to me: "Cara signorina, this is just a ruse, believe me. I was so worried about you and brought you some chocolates. The nuns will give them to you. Besides, - and he fished in his pocket for a piece of paper - here is my 'phone number. Do call me if you need help."

When I was discharged from Poggio Reale, I was told that I had to report to the Questura, i.e. the Police Station, every single day. My first thought was to call this humane soul. I was told that he had left Naples for the south. He had come to Naples on a "special assignment". My next thought was to contact my parents in Frankfurt. Writing was impossible as all mail was censured i.e. opened and read by special agents. Calling from a private 'phone was also too risky. Phones were tabbed. So I went to the main Post Office to place my call. My mother answered. I said one word only: "Come!"

Two days later my wonderful parents arrived in Naples. We took a vessel to the Island of Capri. There, on the beach, we could risk to talk freely without being overheard. My dad said that he would be trying to get me a visa for England. My parents were British citizens. Naples had no British consulate. So, we

took the train to Florence. There, the British Vice Consul promised to get me a visa for England as soon as I had finished taking my exams in Perugia. I still remember how grateful I was to this sympathetic consular official who believed my story because, after all, my stepfather, Ernest Horkheimer, had a different surname from mine which was Straus.

A few months later I took my final exams and, in September 1938 I prepared to leave for England. Since I had to cross Switzerland and wanted to see my uncle and aunt for the last time as they lived in Basel, Switzerland, I applied for a Swiss visa. The Swiss consul wrote the following words into my passport: "Fraeulein Edith Straus has the permission to spend one day in Switzerland. Should she extend her stay, she will be deported to her country of birth." And this is where I experienced the negative attitude of the Swiss authorities towards foreign Jews. Also, as a result of Swiss demands, the German consulate in Naples had stamped my passport with a "J". This allowed the Swiss police at the border "to check whether I was Aryan or not Aryan." (These were the exact terms made public after the war). A visa for France was also unobtainable. So I crossed eastern France taking in the view from the train window. After crossing from Calais to Dover, my good parents, who had especially come from Frankfurt, greeted me at the pier at Dover. "Welcome to England" were their words. And the tiny cucumber sandwiches that were served us on the train to London were so typically British that I cried with joy. I finally felt secure.

In London I refreshed my knowledge of English by taking a course at the Berlitz School. I was fortunate enough to pretty soon land a job at the German Jewish Refugees Committee (the famous Woburn House, later called Bloomsbury House) as private secretary to Anna Schwab. Since war was threatening, we worked day and night with the British Home Office to get prominent endangered German and Austrian Jews to England. After World War II started, I was promoted to a position at the Housing Bureau. This involved placing refugee children, who had come to England by means of Children Transports, arranged by us, in homes, schools and hostels and, finally, arranging for their evacuation from endangered London to the countryside or even to the United States. I still remember that eerie feeling when I came home late at night in blacked out London groping my way from Bloomsbury House to the Tottenham Court Underground (which people used as a air-raid shelter) and the ten minute walk from Brent Station to 99 Woodstock Ave which seemed endless.

Before this, on November 9 - 10, 1938, was the infamous event of the Kristallnacht. The reason for this was the following episode:

On November 7, 1938, Herschel Grynsczpan, a seventeen year old student studying in Paris, shot Ernst vom Rath to avenge the

suffering inflicted on the other members of the Grynszpan family. On Otober 27, Grynszpan's parents - along with some 18,000 other Jews originally from Poland though long resident in Germany - were transported against their will and under inhumane conditions to the Polish border. A postcard from his father had brought this to Herschel's attention. He then took his anger out on vom Rath, the first German official whom he could get to see at the German Embassy. This assassination was the immediate pretext for the Kristallnacht pogrom on the night of November 9, 1938.

On that date approximately 30,000 Jews were arrested in Germany and sent off to concentration camps. Thousands of Jewish shops, warehouses and homes were burnt or otherwise destroyed. Fires were set not only to hundreds of synagogues but also to the Thora scrolls and prayerbooks they housed. That same day, two friends of my parents, a young physician, Dr. Harry Brauer, who had a position at the Jewish Hospital in Frankfurt, and a Mr. Kallmann had fled to my parents' house. There, our cook hid them in the Wintergarten (palm alcove) of our house. This room was protected by a heavy roller-shutter which could be let down between the Wintergarten and the dining room. The Gestapo, who were looking for them, would not have found out but the next day Mr. Kallmann insisted on going home whilst Harry Brauer was able to hide for 3 more days. On his way home Mr. Kallmann was met by the Gestapo officers who had looked for him the previous day."Where were you yesterday and last night?" they asked. Mr. Kallmann told them, not knowing that it was a crime, even for foreign citizens like my parents who were British subjects, to hide Jews. So the Gestapo came to get my father. Our cook, always alert to danger, told them to come back later as my father was not at home. Immediately my Dad took a taxi to the Frankfurt airport and took the next plane to London - never to return to Frankfurt. After the immediate danger had subsided, Harry Brauer was able to reach the Jewish Hospital and eventually fly to London where he got married to his former girlfriend, Ilse, with my parents as witnesses at their wedding. They were able to settle in Sisseton, So. Dakota, where he established himself as a medical doctor. Their grandson, Jonathan, who happened to meet my granddaughter Alice at the U.of Wisconsin in Madison, WI., in 1998, wrote me several times thanking me warmly that my parents had saved his grandfather's life. He also wanted me to know that his grandfather still treasures a little leather suitcase which my mother had given him in 1939 when he left the Horkheimers'.

Coming home from work at Bloomsbury House on the day of the terrible events of the Kristallnacht, I was astonished to find good old Dad sitting in my room at the boarding house in Finchley Road where I lived. The events were a signal for my mother and for my sister Lilian to pack up their belongings. My mother arrived soon afterwards. My sister and her husband, John Zucker, were fortunately spared during the Kristallnacht. John had just started a new position as Rabbi of a Heidelberg synagogue and was

not yet registered at Police Headquarters. They did leave a few months later after making certain that the children of their congregants had reached safety in England. Many of them came by means of the Children Transports which we were able to arrange at Bloomsbury House. John and Lilian who had the good fortune to eventually join the Congregation of Rabbi Aba Hillel Silver in Cleveland, Ohio. - since his wife was a born Horkheimer - joined us then in London at 99 Woodstock Ave., Golders Green, where also my "dare-devil" brother Mickey (Milton) lived (at age 5 he astonished the familly by jumping from the highest board into the swimming pool). He was only 18 years old at the time and, at the outbreak of war, immediately volunteered to be a dispatch-rider. His means of transportation: his bicycle. Since, as a Jew, he was not longer permitted to attend a German school, he had attended Wellington School, a British high school. His aim was to become a pilot with K.L.M. As it were, he did become a pilot officer in the Royal Air Force and, at the age of 23, was killed when his plane was shot down by the Nazi Air Force somewhere over Hannover, Germany. For years my parents had the hope that he would return some day. His name is inscribed at the Air Force Memorial in Runnymede.

Sofar I have only spoken of the political events which influenced the course of my life between 1935 and 1939. After matriculating from the gymnasium (Viktoriaschule) in Frankfurt a.M. in 1929, my aim was to study history-of-art. After the depression there was not much money available, so I decided to go to work at my grandfather's bank, Frohmann & Co. during the day and to study history-of-art at night at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universitaet in Frankfurt. In April 1933 I was lucky to be accepted as a volunteer by the bank Bondi & Maron in Dresden, an artistically beautiful city with a very prominent university. Unfortunately this was three months after Hitler became chancellor of Germany.
That same month was the infamous "Judenboykott" (the boycott of Jewish stores and businesses) when Nazi stormtrooper stood guard in front of Jewish establishments, not permitting clients to enter. I was getting ready to start my job at Bondi & Maron. That same morning I had a call from one of the bank's head clerks. He told me not to come to the bank, but instead to meet him at the Cafe Zunz, a well-known coffeehaus. "Don't come to work at the bank, please. We cannot have you there at this time" were his words. There, again, political events interrupted the course of my life. As far as I seem to remember, the Bondis were Jewish. As far as Consul Maron was concerned, I cannot say this for certain.

Whoever has read Hitler's "Mein Kampf" knows about the devilish plans Hitler had for the fate of the Jews.

But there were also bright episodes in my life. One of them was my visit with Hermann Hesse in Montagnola, Switzerland. At

that time Hermann Hesse was my favorite writer, especially his book Narziss and Goldmund had become a favorite of mine. A patron of Hesse had put a house at his disposal which was located high above Lake Lugano, Tessin, in a section which had benefitted from its mild climate and was a paradise of exotic plants and flowers. The air was scented with orange and jasmin blossoms. The view, high above Lake Lugano, was breathtakingly beautiful. I had seen reproductions of watercolors Hesse had done from scenes near his home and these inspired me to go and see some of these for myself. So, in 1931, I went there knapsack and all. I rang the doorbell at the Hesse's house. His wife answered. My great wish was to visit Hermann Hesse, I told her. She went to talk to him and told me to come back at noon and that they would be happy to have me as their guest for lunch. Like in a dream I walked through the vineyards of Montagnola. When I returned, I was shown to the rear of the house, a terrace on a hillside, where Hesse greeted me with open arms. My first thought was that he resembled Mahatma Gandhi. He was slender, deeply tanned, on his head a wide-brimmed sombrero. "Would you like to play bocce with me?" he enquired. And then it was lunchtime soon to my relief, as I had never heard of the Italian game bocce. Hesse had cut a red rose and a pink zinnia blossom and brought these to our table, putting the red rose in a vase in front of his wife and the zinnia in front of me. I remember him asking me about Frankfurt where, he told me, he had spent some time in a hospital. He made me feel very comfortable asking questions about me and my family. I was so overwhelmed by this encounter that I, for the world of me, was not able to tell him how much I ~~r~~enjoyed reading his books.

Forty years later, in 1971, my life-long friend Yelle drove us to Hesse's house. It was still there, but we could only see it at a distance through a locked iron gate. There was no plaque with his name. We went to the cemetery closeby. There was his simple grave with his name and the dates of his life and a few tufts of red begonias.

Yelle (her real name: Dr. Marianne Pulver) and I were friends from childhood. When we were 17 and our reactionary singing teacher at the Viktoriaschule, Herr Laepple, asked us to leave the room and threatened to report our behaviour to the principal, Dr. Reinhold, we immediately went to see Dr. Reinhold telling him the reason for our expulsion: we had taken hold of each other's arms and moved our bodies in time with the singing of the Wacht am Rhein (the Watch on the River Rhein), a reactionary song praising the political power of Germany over its neighbor, France. Dr.Reinhold, with his positive views on democracy and liberalism, smiled and calmed us down.

Let me tell you more about Yelle: after taking her degree in economics and a Ph.D. in sinology, she left Germany in 1938 via Russia and Siberia to accept a position in China in protest

x Switzerland

against Nazi politics. She had no reason to leave - she was of the Protestant faith. Years went by. She and her husband, Bert, came to visit us in the United States and, to our great surprise, she had converted to Judaism. Yelle is a very special human being.

Another bright episode, which actually changed the course of my life, happened in May 1937:

Our history-of-art teacher, il Professore Giordano, at the Università per gli Stranieri in Perugia, was going to take his students to the art museum in Gubbio at the same time when the yearly Gubbio Festival was taking place. My friend, Lilo Erlanger and I were hard up for money at the time. So we wanted to avoid paying for the trip. We made a bet with two fellow students, Sigi Weissmann from Vienna and David Epstein from Copenhagen, that we would make it to Gubbio and back without spending money. We set out from Perugia at an early hour, trying to hitch a ride to Gubbio. At that time there were not many cars on the road. So, after a long wait, we finally hitched a ride with a farmer in his open carriage pulled by a horse. To our dismay, it soon started to rain, so that we arrived in Gubbio in soaking wet clothes. What to do? We put on our pajamas - mine was bright yellow with brown stripes - to meet the group of students and Professor Giordano at the museum's entrance. Embarrassed because of our looks and also anxious to find a ride back to Perugia, we decided to go our separate ways. We went to an ice-cream parlor to plan our strategy. There, at a table not far from ours, sat a gentleman, an elderly lady and a girl of about 12. They were talking German. The nice looking gentleman wore a handsome checkered jacket. What if he drove a car back to Perugia? They left and, soon after, we spotted the lady and the sweet looking girl sitting at a table in a latteria. What to do? We needed to find out whether they drove a car. So we sat down at the pretty roomy white marble table next to them, started a conversation and found out that not only had they come to Gubbio by bus, but also that the Erlanger's cook in Munich (that is where Lilo came from) had previously been in the employment of the lady's daughter, Elisabeth, who also lived in Munich with her family. They gave us their names: Isabella Schmidt (my future mother-in-law) and Renate Schmidt (my beloved future sister-in-law) who is nowadays a physicist at the Goddard Space Center in Green Belt, Maryland. They came from Stuttgart. The lady's son, Gerhard Schmidt (a scientist and my future husband) had stepped out to get some cigarettes. When he returned and offered them to us - they were Macedonias - I declined, as I wanted to make a good impression on that fascinating looking gentleman (I did smoke cheap Italian cigarettes, Populari, at the time - when I had the money).

We did eventually get a ride to Perugia from the sons of American bootleggers who studied medicine in Perugia. So we had

won our bet.

The next day, a student of mine who hailed from Warsaw, Poland, and to whom I taught German, and I walked down Corso Vanucci, the main thoroughfare of Perugia. There, sitting in front of an espresso bar, was the gentleman whom we had met in Gubbio the previous day. He introduced himself and asked whether he could accompany me home. On the way he told me that he had seen me and my friend Lilo Erlanger in an espresso bar before, that he had heard us talk German and that he had said to himself: "How sad it is that, during these politically difficult times, you cannot have the freedom to talk to pretty German girls for fear of their being Nazis." He had invited his mother and sister to come to Perugia as he did not want to go back to Germany which he had left in April 1933.

He had been an assistant professor of biochemistry at the medical faculty of the University of Frankfurt a.M. There, he had also taken his M.D. degree summa cum laude in 1924.

Some members of the faculty accused him of having falsified an autopsy report stating that a communist student had been shot in the back by a high ranking Nazi. This was a trick to have him arrested by the Gestapo. So, in April 1933 Gerhard had to leave Germany overnight with his one precious possession: his cello. The dean of the medical faculty, Profesor Fischer-Wasels, whom Gerhard told of his plight, accompanied him to the Swiss border, gave him some money and wished him "Good luck." He was one of the courageous anti-Nazis. The previous summer Gerhard had had a fellowship to work at the Aquarium in Naples, Italy. Professor Dorn, a very decent scientist of Russian descent, was the director of the Aquarium. He let Gerhard continue his studies on sea urchins until he could find a more permanent position. This opened up in Stockholm at Hans von Euler Chepin's laboratory. He had won the Nobel Price in 1929. I still remember Gerhard raving about the fantastic Smorggasboards. Also about his friendship with and stories about Bernhard Zondek who later on emigrated to Israel. He had made himself a name with the Aschhein-Zondek procedure.

Gerhard's next position was in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. I vividly remember him telling about an incident which happened there: a member of the faculty had a home on an island in Lake Ontario. One day he said to Gerhard very nonchalantly: "Do come and visit us sometimes." Gerhard, being a strong swimmer, decided one weekend to swim to the island and make good this invitation. He arrived, dripping wet, rang the doorbell and, lo and behold, found himself in the middle of an ongoing cocktail party. Hastily, the lady of the house fetched a change of clothing to make him more presentable. - Meanwhile, at the shore, the bathing establishment sent out a search party to look for the owner of the abandoned clothing.

From Kingston Gerhard had come to Perugia and, 3 weeks later, he was going to start working with Professor P. A. Levine at the Rockefeller Institute (later Rockefeller University) in New York on a Rockefeller Fellowship.

In order to become a United States citizen he had to go to Cuba and enter the United States from there. So he took a bus from New York to Miami and a boat to Havanna. I remember him telling me how much he enjoyed his stay in Havanna as he could leisurly walk around the boardwalk puffing on big Havanna cigars. Once back in New York he received an offer by Gertie and Carl Cori to join them in their research at Washington University in St. Louis.
When they were awarded the Nobel Price in 1947 they sent Gerhard $ 1,000 for his contribution to their achievement. For this money we bought our first "new" car. a Studebaker. Finally, in 1939, a position was offered to Gerhard as Professor of Biochemistry at Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston, Massachusetts.

This, in brief, was Gerhard's odyssey. On the way to my rooming house he asked me: "Fraulein Straus, would you know of someone who would type a scientific article - in German - for me?" I did this and, in turn, he corrected my article on Galileo. His Italian was far superior to mine.

Three weeks later, Gerhard's oceanliner (I think that it was the "Saturnia" which was owned by an Italian shipping company) sailed from Naples via the Straight of Gibraltar to New York. We corresponded fitfully. I still have all his letters. One day, I was already living in London, a very special letter arrived: "If you are still fond of me, would you consider marrying me?" This totally changed my life.

3 years and 4 months after we had met in Gubbio, i.e. in September 1940, was I finally able to join Gerhard in Boston. It took so long as we had to overcome a host of obstacles: my papers at the American Consulate in London were mixed up with the ones of another Edith Straus. Gerhard's affidavit was not considered sufficient, since he had also sent affidavits to his mother and his sister. Besides he sent money to his sister Elisabeth and her husband, Sepp Grunbaum, who had emigrated to Cardiff, Wales, for the education of their children, Eva (a future concert violinist) and Rolf (a future engineer). His obligation to support 5 people were more than he could meet with the salary he was making.

The war between England and Germany started on September 1. 1939. My mother-in-law, Isabella, often used to say: "When Hitler invaded Poland, I knew my time had come to leave Germany." That is to say that she was fortunate enough to leave for England 3 days before the start of the war. Renate had left earlier on a Children's Transport.

Renate just gave me the details of what Isabella had to go through before she was able to leave Germany:

The day after the Kristallnacht her mother was ordered to go to Nuremberg where she owned half of two apartment houses. Her nephew, Martin Erlanger, a former lawyer in Nuremberg who had emigrated with his Protestant wife, Olga, to Uruquai, South America, owned the other half. Streicher, the infamous Gauleiter of Nuremberg, ordered that Jews had to sign away their property without compensation. She was forced to sign the papers that she no longer owned the houses which she had inherited from her father, Moritz Gombrich, who had been headmaster and owner of a private school of boys. The buildings were originally the school buildings. Once she had signed these papers, she came back to Stuttgart. In Stuttgart she applied for an exit visa and a passport. The Stuttgart authorities thought that she still owned her Nuremberg property, and she was charged 40% Reichsfluchtsteuer (a tax penalty for leaving Germany) on those houses as well as what she had in her savings account. Yet this was more cash than she had. So they did not ever issue her a passport until 3 days before the Nazis marched into Poland, and this was the real reason for her leaving Germany at the last moment. Poor Isabella! It must have been a terrible ordeal.

Isabella and Renate arrived in Boston to join Gerhard one day after I had arrived. All of us came on a convoy from blacked-out Liverpool. Isabella and Renate came on the H.M.S. Samaria. Their convoy was attacked by a German submarine in the middle of the ocean. Renate tells me that, at that moment, she lost her gas mask. What a fright! My Cunard-Liner, the H.M.S. Olympia, came through the St. Lawrence River via Quebeck to Montreal. In Montreal the German Jewish passengers - there were 6 of us in a cabin for 2 - who were considered enemy aliens, were chaperoned on land by a group of Bnai-Brith members, feted at a luncheon and brought to a train heading for Boston and New York. In Boston Gerhard took me in his arms. He wore the same checkered jacket which he had worn in Gubbio. This outfit had become a joke with us: it was the one and only time that he had impressed a female not with his charm but with his elegant clothes.

Edith Schmidt, born 10/29/10, in FRANKFURT 9M., GERMANY. PARENTS: DR. FRIEDRICH STRAUS, UROLOGIST, died 1914 IN FRANKFURT. Mother: Alice NÉE FROHMANN, ARTIST, died 1973 IN SAN LEANDRO, CALIFORNIA, USA
8110 El Paseo Grande, # 306
La Jolla, CA. 92037
Tel: (858) 454-5946
STEPFATHER: ERNEST HORKHEIMER, BRITISH SUBJECT, died 1970 IN SAN LEANRO, CA. U.S.A
BUSINESS MAN,

SONS: MICHAEL T. Schmidt, born 6/25/41
808 WEST END AVE., # 1209
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10025
Tel: (212) 865-5358

MILTON J. Schmidt, M.D., born 10/24/44
31 PERKINS ST.,
NEWTON, MA. 02465
Tel: (617) 964-0085 dau.-in-law: HOMAI SCHMIDT